

# The Legacy of Waste Couture, with Luz Claudio

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In the 2007 news feature “Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry,” *EHP* explored the environmental and occupational health implications of producing cheap—indeed, virtually disposable—clothing. This story has gone on to become the journal’s most popular article of all time. Author Luz Claudio tells host Ashley Ahearn about the inspiration for “Waste Couture,” why this story has captured so much attention, and changes she has seen in fashion since its publication.

**AHEARN:** It’s *The Researcher’s Perspective*. I’m Ashley Ahearn.

Fashion can be fickle. That designer off-the-shoulder dress JLo’s wearing on the red carpet might inspire hundreds of clothing manufacturers to come up with their own more affordable versions, and consumers buy them like—well, like they’re going out of style.

And they usually do.

The concept of “fast fashion” is not a new one, but exploring the environmental impacts of our transient tastes is a more recent phenomenon. In 2007 Luz Claudio wrote a news feature for *EHP* titled “Waste Couture: Environmental Impact of the Clothing Industry.”<sup>1</sup> It went on to become the most highly viewed article of all time on *EHP*’s website.

Luz Claudio is an associate professor of preventive medicine and chief in the Division of International Health at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York.

Dr. Claudio, thanks for joining me.

**CLAUDIO:** Thank you.

**AHEARN:** Why don't you start by telling me, what exactly does "fast fashion" mean, and where did you come up with the idea for this article?

**CLAUDIO:** Well, fast fashion is like fast food in that a designer or manufacturer might translate an idea that is shown in a fashion show into a very cheap and affordable way to get to the mainstream consumer. But one of the things intrinsic in fast fashion is that it includes this obsolescence so that something that may have been fashionable, quote unquote, last spring—like, say, the skinny jeans or something like that—now is seen as obsolete in that new trends in the design make the garment no longer fashionable or acceptable. And so I wanted to know, does this have an impact on environmental health.

**AHEARN:** And what did you find?

**CLAUDIO:** Well, I found through researching this article that there are many environmental health issues that come about from fast fashion, and one of them is the problem of all the hazardous waste that is generated in the manufacturing of that cheap T-shirt. And so, for example, cotton is the most highly pesticide-used crop,<sup>2</sup> and that, of course, is a concern. Another environmental health issue that I found with fast fashion is the use of certain chemicals like perfluorinated chemicals, PFCs.<sup>3</sup> These are sometimes added to some garments so that they are more stain resistant, and you don't have to iron them. You know, who irons anymore, right? (laughs) So you know, some of these properties that are very desirable in clothing are given by these added chemicals.

**AHEARN:** How have people responded to your article? It came out four years ago. Have you seen any evidence of your article affecting the fashion industry or people's personal shopping habits?

**CLAUDIO:** Oh, well, there's been a lot of awareness about this issue. I think that—I've seen several blogs from young women, one in particular, who cited the article as the reason for her to decide not to buy new clothes for a year, and I don't know whether she actually achieved it, but... I know that a friend of mine who works in the garment industry told me about a professor at Parsons New School for Design who teaches sustainability and has used the article in his teachings of zero waste design, which is a way in which they can cut the patterns of a garment to fit like a puzzle on the fabric so that when they cut it they don't have a lot of waste material.<sup>4</sup> So there have been several things that have happened.

I recently went on a vacation to Paris, and I saw a store that sold “trashion,” and that's a new term for me, which is “fashion made out of trash.” Apparently that is a cool thing now, and I actually bought a belt made out of car safety belts. It's a taste, but the fact that the garment or the accessory is not hiding that it's made of trash might be some kind of trend. So I feel confident that it has had some impact, and I also have seen the article actually reprinted several times in blogs and people reacting to the blogs. Because *EHP* is an open-access journal, other people are able to copy it freely, so I've seen it as recently as 2010 reprinted in other sites.

**AHEARN:** So, Dr. Claudio, where do you shop?

**CLAUDIO:** Oh my gosh! Well, I live in New York City, so the temptation to dress is everywhere. One of the things that I have changed a lot is that I really love consignment stores, and I go to those a lot. And here in New York there are high-end consignment stores where expensive labels like Chanel and Prada and all that, you can find them for a fraction of what they will retail for in the real store. So I think that trying to build that into your consciousness and buy things that are higher quality instead of buying things that just last for a couple of washes and you have to throw it away is one of the things that I do in my personal buying habits. Another thing is that I have a four-year-old daughter, and I really try to get clothing from her

cousins who are a year older and also give her clothes to people who have kids that are younger.

**AHEARN:** What would you say to someone who wants to be fashionable but is on a tight budget?

**CLAUDIO:** Well, I think being aware of other options like pre-owned clothes, like consignment stores, like thrift shops, like exchanging with your friends and family. I've had clothing exchange parties, I call it, with my girlfriends at home and what we do is we clean our closets, we bring them over, put them in a big pile in the middle of the living room, and try each other's clothes and whatever is left we take it to a charity. So those are things that you can do to feel that you have new clothes all the time. But also, you know, just the act of clothes shopping is a pastime, so trying to find other ways to spend our time is a way to address this issue, because especially when you live in the city, all you have to do is walk down the street, and you're tempted to spend an hour here, an hour there, just looking through the clothing racks, even if you're not looking for something specific and you don't need anything. So trying to find other activities is something that would help in this situation.

**AHEARN:** Dr. Claudio, thanks so much for joining me.

**CLAUDIO:** Thank you, Ashley.

**AHEARN:** Dr. Luz Claudio is an associate professor of preventive medicine and chief in the Division of International Health at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York.

And that's *The Researcher's Perspective*. I'm Ashley Ahearn. Thanks for downloading!

## Notes and References

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<sup>1</sup> Claudio L. Waste couture: environmental impact of the clothing industry. *Environ Health Perspect* 115(9):A449–A454 (2007); <http://dx.doi.org/10.1289/ehp.115-a449>.

<sup>2</sup> Cotton accounts for an estimated 11% of pesticides and 25% of insecticides used globally each year, while taking up 2.4% of farmland [Clay JW. *World Agriculture and the Environment*. Washington, DC:Island Press (2004)]. Many of the pesticides used on cotton—including aldicarb, parathion, methamidophos, deltamethrin, endosulfan, lindane, and chlorpyrifos—have been linked to severe adverse health effects in humans.

<sup>3</sup> The limited human health data available suggest PFCs may be associated with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, elevated non-HDL (i.e., “bad”) cholesterol, altered thyroid hormone levels, preeclampsia, and low birth weight. Based on data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2003–2004, virtually all Americans are estimated to carry detectable levels of PFCs in their blood [Calafat AM, et al. *Environ Health Perspect* 115(11):1596–1602 (2007); <http://dx.doi.org/10.1289/ehp.10598>]. However, it is unknown how much PFC exposure, if any, comes from clothing.

<sup>4</sup> Parsons the New School for Design. Zero Waste Denim: Parsons Exhibition Showcases Cutting Edge Approach to Sustainable Design; Loomstate to Produce Student-Designed Fashion as Part of Fall Collection [press release]. New York, NY:Parsons The New School for Design (2 Feb 2011). Available: <http://tinyurl.com/3qjjeg4> [accessed 26 Jul 2011].

**Ashley Ahearn**, host of *The Researcher's Perspective*, has been a producer and reporter for National Public Radio and an Annenberg Fellow at the University of Southern California specializing in science journalism.